Thesis Statements for Literary Analysis

**What is a thesis statement?** A thesis statement is the controlling idea of a paper. It expresses succinctly the idea that the body of the paper will prove. Other names for the thesis statement are "main idea," "controlling idea," and "thesis." If the paper is a literary analysis, as all of the papers you will write for your AP literature course will be, your thesis statement will make a debatable claim about one or more works of literature. Usually, thesis statements appear in the first paragraph of the paper.

**Can any statement be a thesis statement?** No. A thesis statement should be a fresh idea or opinion that is supportable based on facts or evidence taken from the story, poem or play discussed in the literary analysis. That is, a paper's thesis cannot be a restatement of fact or an unsupportable opinion. A thesis statement must also be interesting and not immediately obvious. It must elaborate an idea that most readers would find new and refreshing, rather than unduly familiar or self-evident. A thesis statement often suggests a particular way of reading or understanding a story, an interpretation that the average reader wouldn't see right away. The best thesis statements are specific rather than general.

**What would be an example of an excellent thesis statement?** Look at the statements below about "Sonny's Blues" and decide whether each would work as a thesis statement.

a. Because we sympathize with Sonny, the drug addict in the story, rather than with his brother, the narrator, "Sonny's Blues" presents a complex picture of drug use as a means of coping with sorrow and fear.

b. In "Sonny's Blues," James Baldwin writes about two brothers attempting to repair their relationship.

c. Both of the characters in "Sonny's Blues" -- Sonny and the narrator -- change over the course of the story.

d. In "Sonny's Blues" Baldwin uses four female characters, three of whom are mothers and one of whom is an artist, to establish his theme that there's no way to avoid suffering in life.

e. By the end of "Sonny's Blues," the narrator is liberated from his warped personality; he finally begins to feel, which means he will be freed from his fear and sadness.

f. Though many people would view the narrator as too conservative and, for most of the story, not caring enough toward his brother, the narrator's failings are easy to understand. Often, the only way to gain a foothold in life is to ignore people whose lifestyles or behaviors threaten your
A paper needs a strong thesis statement so that it can make a strong argument. Weak thesis statements can result in papers with no clear direction or in papers that rely on plot summary to fill their pages. A good thesis statement predicts limits and organizes the content of the essay. In other words, it notifies your reader about the scope of the paper, telling him or her exactly what your paper will cover and in what order.

Can a thesis statement be more than one sentence? Yes. Often the best thesis statements are complex enough to require two or even three sentences. If you need several sentences to express your idea, use them!